Image and nature in Alberti's De pictura : A case of 'model inversion' ?

Anna Little

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IMAGE AND NATURE IN ALBERTI'S *DE PICTVRA*

A CASE OF «MODEL INVERSION»?

ESTRATTO

da

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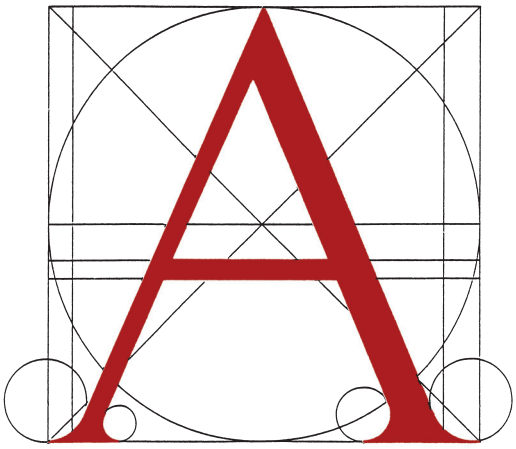

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Anna Little

IMAGE AND NATURE IN ALBERTI'S *DE PICTVRA*

A CASE OF «MODEL INVERSION»?

That nature constitutes the essential model for painting is one of most fundamental principles advanced by Alberti in his *De pictura*. It is also, seemingly, one of the most straightforward. Straightforwardness fast emerging, however, to be anything but a characteristic trait of Alberti's,[1] it is hardly surprising to find that the relationship between image and nature may be rather less evident than it has hitherto appeared. Starting by re-examining the conceptual basis of Alberti's method for imitating nature and going on to re-consider the novelty of the *De pictura* with respect to Brunelleschi's two perspective demonstrations, this article exposes a number of points which throw into question the traditional interpretations of both Alberti's and Brunelleschi's position regarding the pair image / nature and suggest the need to re-consider them in the light of a long pictorial inquiry centring on the notion of «place».

Alberti opens his text by declaring his intention to «expose the art of painting following nature's principles»,[2] and subsequently comes

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[1] Alberti's penchant for expressing himself indirectly or elliptically, often with a subtle, rather ironical wit, is a subject of growing interest in the domain of Albertian scholarship. For a concise overview of the trend, see Caspar Pearson, *Humanism and the urban world: Leon Battista Alberti and the Renaissance city*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. See also Philippe Guérin, *De la raison ironique chez Alberti*, in «Albertiana», XV, 2012, pp. 31-56; and Mathilde Bert, *Lectures, réécritures et peintures à partir de Pline l'Ancien: La réception de l'*Histoire naturelle *en Italie, de Pétrarque à Vasari*, Ph.D. dissertation: Université de Liège, A.u. 2012, pp. 150-215.

[2] Cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *De pictura*, I 1: «[...] picturam ab ipsis naturæ principiis exponemus». The latin text cited all through the article is that established in *On painting and On sculpture: The latin texts of* De pictura *and* De statua *by Leon Battista Alberti*, Translated

back to the idea some twenty times, either to insist on the necessity of drawing on nature's example («Never doubt that each and every step in learning [to paint] must be taken from nature»:[3] to master the art of composition, «there is no more certain and fitting way than to observe nature herself»;[4] the representation of bodily movements must be learnt through «diligent examination of nature»;[5] pictorial beauty and force depend on «always taking from nature that which you wish to paint»,[6] etc.), or to remind us, after having described one or another principle essential for painting, that «this is perfectly demonstrated by nature»,[7] or «this is plainly shown by nature»,[8] or again «this you may learn perfectly from nature».[9]

These references to nature appear regularly throughout all the three parts of the treatise, and thus concern almost all the various aspects Alberti sees fit to deal with, from the treatment of contours, light, colour, movement, proportions and the attainment of beauty right through to tips for outdoing the greatest painters in history. As diverse as these aspects may seem, their relationship with nature is underpinned by a single notion: that of «place» (*locus*). Imitating nature is for Alberti a case of correctly «putting things in their places»: again and again nature's lesson is indicated in terms of «assigning», «disposing» or «guiding» things to «their places».[10] In the Latin version of the

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by Cecil Grayson, London, Phaidon, 1972. All translations are my own, but I am largely indebted to Cecil Grayson's English translation, the French translation by Thomas Golsenne and Betrand Prévost (*La peinture*, Paris, Seuil, 2004) and to Maurice Brock.

[3] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, III 55: «Caput sit omnes discendi gradus ab ipsa natura esse petendos».

[4] Cf. *ibid.*, II 35: «nulla alia modo mihi visa est via certior quam ut naturam ipsam intueamur».

[5] Cf. *ibid.*, II 42: «diligentissime ex ipsa natura cuncta perscrutanda sunt».

[6] Cf. *ibid.*, III 56: «ergo semper quæ picturi sumus, ea a natura sumamus».

[7] Cf. *ibid.*, II 32: «natura id quidem pulchre demonstrat».

[8] Cf. *ibid.*, I 20: «a natura ipsa ita ostendi palam est».

[9] Cf. *ibid.*, II 46: «quidem a natura [...] pulchre perdisces».

[10] Cf. *ibid.*, II 30, II 31, II 35, II 36 and II 40, respectively: «suis locis designans»; «omnia in locis suis disposita»; «certo loco dirigamus»; «suis locis inhærere»; «in qua suis locis permixti aderunt»; etc. On the complexity of the notion of imitation and the vocabulary related to it in the *De pictura* see MAURICE BROCK, *L'action du peintre d'après le* De pictura*: Contribution à une étude du lexique de la «représentation»*, in *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du Congrès international «Gli Este e l'Alberti: Tempo e misura»: Ferrara, 29 · XI-30 · XII · 2004*, Édités par / A cura di / Edited by Francesco Furlan & Gianni Venturi, Paris, S.I.L.B.A. & Pisa-Roma, Serra, 2010, vol. II, pp. 149-174.

De pictura, the words «locus» and «collocare» (*i.e.* 'to put in a place'), together with their various conjugations, appear no less than seventy times. Certainly in a good number of instances, the sense of «locus» is purely rhetorical: 'at this point', 'here', etc.[11] Nevertheless, in a greater number of examples – and, notably, all those informing the fundamental principle of imitating nature –, the word signifies a situation in the physical sense: a location either within the natural world or the depicted space or on the painting's surface.

Alberti clearly considers place to play a key role in determining the way we perceive the natural world: according to his reasoning, pretty much all changes in the appearance of observed things – from effects of distance and angles of view to those of light – are fundamentally understandable in terms of the places they occupy.[12] Correct imitation of nature, the placing of things in *their* places within the image (and by «things», Alberti designates not only bodies, but also all the elements which he considered, from a pictorial point of view, to compose them: members, surfaces, lines, right down to simple points) consequently means reproducing the places they occupy in nature or, to be perfectly precise, the places they either occupy or would in principle occupy in nature. The necessity of the conditional arises from the fact that Alberti's idea of imitating nature was not so much about imitating a scene observed in its entirety, but rather composing a scene using a certain number of selected observed things according to principles learnt from nature. Imitation for Alberti was thus a double-barrelled affair involving, on the one hand, direct visual observation of individual things and, on the other, general compositional rules provided by nature. In the first case, the painter transposed each part of an observed model from its place in nature to a corresponding place on the surface of the painting. In the second, the action was indirect: the objective of

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[11] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, I 3, I 5, and II 25 respectively: «At this point, we are incited to» (*Is locus admonet*); «which we shall speak of in due course» (*de qua paulo post suo loco dicemus*); «here, it is necessary to show» (*Idcirco hoc loco ostendendum*); etc.

[12] The most apparently explicit passage on the relationship between place and nature contained in the *De pictura* is in reality typically elliptic – cf. *De pictura*, II 30: «Since painting strives to depict seen things, let us take note of how things are seen. Firstly, when we look at a thing, we see that it is something which occupies a place» (*Nam cum pictura studeat res visas repræsentare, notemus quemadmodum res ipsæ sub aspectu veniant. Principio quidem cum quid aspicimus, id videmus esse aliquid quod locum occupet*). Apparently stating the evident, Alberti discretely puts his finger here on the full complexity of the issue: what does it mean to see that it is «something that occupies a place»?

the painter being to apply in his work principles which he had previously abstracted from his observation of nature; in other words, to produce a given set of objects in the places these objects would have occupied were they to have been so assembled in the natural world.

To facilitate these two facets of imitation Alberti recommends the use of two things which may be considered as «placing tools». The first is optional and helps with «direct imitation» (*i.e.* 'the representation of directly observed things'). Introduced as an «intersection» (*intercisio*),[13] but referred to most frequently thereafter as a «veil» (*velum*), it consists of a very thin, almost transparent piece of material, shot through with a grid of straight lines which divide it into regular squares in the manner of a chess-board. Presumably stretched across a rigid frame, this veil is set up between the painter and the object which he intends to paint, so that the various parts of this object, seen through the veil, appear within one or another of the squares. Having traced a similar grid on the surface to be painted, the painter proceeds by transposing the contents of each square of the veil to the corresponding square of the painting. The second tool is recommended for «indirect imitation» (*i.e.* 'the representation of things according to *nature's principles*'). It consists of a ground-plane or pavement (*pavimentum*), drawn so as to appear to stretch from the lower edge of the picture plane to a distant point behind it and divided into squares or, to be precise, quadrangles, since these squares are presented in perspective. Contrary to the veil, this ground-plane forms an integral and indeed essential part of the image, its absence spelling sure failure to imitate nature correctly.[14] Its role is nevertheless very similar to that of the veil, in that it serves to position depicted elements with respect to a rectilinear grid. Taken together, these two «placing tools», situated perpendicularly to each other as they are, produce one of the most fundamental

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[13] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, II 31.

[14] Cf. *ibid.*, I 21: «This method of dividing up the pavement pertains especially to that part of painting that, when we come to it, we shall call "composition" [...]. As we can easily judge from the works of former ages, this method probably remained completely unknown to our ancestors because of its obscurity and difficulty. You will hardly find any properly composed images [*historia*] by the ancients either in painting or modeling or sculpture» (*Hæc omnis dividendi pavimenti ratio maxime ad eam picturæ partem pertinet, quam nos compositionem suo loco nominabimus [...]. Nam, ut ex operibus priscis facile intelligimus, eadem fortassis apud maiores nostros, quod esset obscura et difficillima, admodum incognita latuit. Vix enim ullam antiquorum historiam apte compositam, neque pictam, neque fictam, neque sculptam reperies*).

conceptual images found in the *De pictura*, namely that of a 3D rectilinear – the height and width of which are provided by the veil, the depth by the ground-place – grid which forms the regulating basis of the pictorial image.

That Alberti himself conceived of his two tools as facets of a single entity that for convenience's sake I shall go on referring to as a 3D grid is backed up by the instrument which he proposes in his treatise on sculpture, the «finitorium».[15] Conceived to help the sculptor reproduce classical statues, this was actually a three-dimensional apparatus, consisting of a horizontal disc equipped with a rotating radius from which a plumb line was suspended; both the circumference of the disk and the movable radius were calibrated and a ruler was used alongside the plumb-line. Placed above the statue to be copied, it thus provided a three-dimensional system of coordinates with respect to which the key parts of the statue (shoulders, knees, etc.) could be plotted and then transposed to the block of stone to be sculpted.

The fact that both Alberti's pictorial and sculptural tools, as well as the device he describes in his *Descriptio urbis Romæ*, which served to map vast urban vistas,[16] are explicitly presented as the means of reproducing the places occupied by things in the natural world, obviously suggests that Alberti conceived nature itself to be possessed of a similar 3D rectilinear structure – a kind of invisible geometrical «skeleton». The specific image of nature's «skeleton» emerges in fact with particular directness in the *De pictura* through Alberti's description of the usefulness of taking into account the human skeleton when painting figures, which intervenes shortly after he introduces his two tools. Though the passage in question is apparently consecrated uniquely to the drawing of human bodies, it contains several indications that

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[15] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *On painting and On sculpture...*, ed. cit., p. 131. *De statua* was written in 1464.

[16] Similar to «finitorium», but larger and devoid of the plumb-line, this was used from a high and central vantage point within the city to be mapped, the cardinal positions of the latter's landmarks being aligned and their position with respect to the radius on the map being transposed from measures taken between the view point and the real horizon. *Leonis Baptistæ Alberti Descriptio urbis Romæ*, Édition critique par Jean-Yves Boriaud & Francesco Furlan, Introduzione di Mario Carpo & Francesco Furlan [...], Ouvrage coordonnée par Francesco Furlan, Paris, S.I.L.B.A. & Firenze, Olschki, 2005 – Engl. tr. by Peter Hicks: *Delineation of the city of Rome (Descriptio urbis Romæ)*, Edited by Mario Carpo & Francesco Furlan, Paris, S.I.L.B.A. & Tempe (Az.), A.C.M.R.S., 2007. The date of the *Descriptio urbis Romæ* remains uncertain, but the general consensus is that it was probably written in the 1440s.

Alberti envisaged the skeleton not only as an aid for life-drawing, but also as illustrating a more general structural principle or, to be more precise, as an analogical image of both nature's geometrical structure and its pictorial counterpart, the 3D grid. The full passage runs as follows:

> In painting animated figures it is useful to start by understanding the place of each bone, since, as these are not given to bending, they always occupy a fixed position. This done, one can put the nerves and muscles in their places and then, finally, clothe the bones and muscles in flesh and skin. But here, I see that someone may object to what I said above, namely that the painter has only to do with things which are visible. This is correct, but just as with dressed figures, it is useful to draw them nude before clothing them in garments, so in painting nudes it is useful to place their bones and muscles before covering them with flesh so as to leave no difficulty in understanding the exact place of each muscle underneath.[17]

The indications which suggest that this passage alludes to more than the human body are present in various forms. Probably the most evident is the way Alberti's remarks on the rigidity and fixed position of bones recall the remarks he made shortly before concerning the veil, namely that its principal advantage resides in its fixed and rigid nature; the fact that it enables the painter to «constantly refer to the same motionless surfaces».[18] Moreover, both skeleton and veil are presented as fixed frames which specifically help to guide more uncertain forms, that are forms prone to appear differently with every change of light, angle of view, etc. to «their places». The second, rather elliptical indication concerns another characteristic shared by the human skeleton and the veil – as indeed the whole 3D grid that the latter denotes –,

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[17] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, II 36: «in animantibus pingendis primum ossa ingenio subterlocare, nam hæc, quod minime inflectantur, semper certam aliquam sedem occupant. Tum oportet nervos et musculos suis locis inhærere, denique extremum carne et cute ossa et musculos vestitos reddere. Sed [video] hoc in loco fortassis aderunt obiicientes quod supra dixerim nihil ad pictorem earum rerum spectare quæ non videantur. Recte illi quidem, sed veluti in vestiendo prius nudum subsignare oportet quem postea vestibus obambiendo involuamus, sic in nudo pingendo prius ossa et musculi disponendi sunt, quos moderatis carnibus et cute ita operias, ut quo sint loco musculi non difficile intelligatur. At enim cum has omnes mensuras natura ipsa explicatas in medium exhibeat, tum in eisdem ab ipsa natura proprio labore recognoscendis utilitatem non modicam inveniet studiosus pictor. Idcirco laborem hunc studiosi suscipiant, ut quantum in symmetria membrorum recognoscenda studii et operæ posuerint, tantum sibi ad eas res quas didicerint memoria firmandas profuisse intelligant».

[18] Cf. *ibid.*, II 31: «semper immotas superficies referat».

namely the fact of only being visible during a preliminary phase in the elaboration of a painting: in the finished work, both end up covered, hidden from sight. This is perfectly evident for the skeleton, since Alberti explicitly describes how it is successively covered in flesh and clothing. The encouragement to recall that it is equally a characteristic of the 3D grid which forms the basis of the image is conveyed by the digression which immediately follows this description of the covering of the skeleton with flesh and skin – «But here, I see that someone may object to what I said above, namely that the painter has only to do with things which are visible». The earlier remark, which this refers back to – «things that are not apprehended by the eye, no one will deny that they do not concern the painter, since he strives to imitate only things which are seen under light»[19] – was motivated by the relationship between painting and geometry and served to justify the introduction of what may be termed «painters' geometry» – an applied form of geometry that Alberti distinguished from the «purely immaterial» geometry of mathematicians;[20] «painters geometry» involving visible signs rather than abstract figures.[21] The remark justifying the suitableness of this kind of adapted geometry for the painter intervenes, more specifically, just as Alberti passes from the definition of the point to that of the line. This, and the fact that the whole discourse on geometry leads up to the description of the sub-divided ground-plane and the image of the underlying 3D grid, means that Alberti's digression in mid description of the human skeleton inevitably, albeit discretely, reinforces the parallel between this grid and the skeleton: not only does the 3D pictorial grid share with the skeleton the fact of constituting an underlying, regulating structure; it also shares its very materiality, the fact of being initially visible and only progressively rendered invisible by occultation.

While this may seem a very roundabout way of introducing an analogy, it is worth noting that Alberti had an undeniable penchant not

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[19] Cf. *ibid.*, I 2: «Quæ vero intuitum non recipiunt, ea nemo ad pictorem nihil pertinere negabit. Nam ea solum imitari studet pictor quæ sub luce vedeantur».

[20] Cf. *ibid.*, I 1: «They [mathematicians] measure the shapes and forms of things in the mind alone, entirely separated from matter» (*Illi enim solo ingenio, omni seiuncta materia, species et formas rerum metiuntur*).

[21] Cf. *ibid.*, I 2: «I call a ''sign'' anything which is situated on a plane such that it can be seen with the eye» (*Signum hoc loco appello quicquid in superficie ita insit ut possit oculo conspici*).

only for expressing himself indirectly or elliptically, but also for playing on apparent contradictions.[22] Incidentally, the multi-levelled significance of the passage on the skeleton seems all the more intentional in the light of the fact that straight after the digression which re-introduces the question of visible/invisible things, Alberti backs up his logic by way of a neatly inserted analogy between the skeleton and the nude – equally invisible only because covered.

Let us come now to the idea that Alberti intended the scope of the skeleton analogy to take in not only the 3D pictorial grid but also the geometrical properties of nature. In principle, his insistence on the distinction between a purely intellectual mathematicians' geometry and a visually manifest painters' geometry would seem to exclude this possibility. In practice (and in typical albertian style), however, this very insistence serves rather to bind his pictorial signs to a set of invisible counterparts than to exclude the latter from his discourse. Consequently, any analogy involving the 3D pictorial grid more or less automatically extends to nature's corresponding structure. Furthermore, though Alberti explicitly introduces lines as visible entities, comparable as such to the bones of the human skeleton, his subsequent remarks all reinforce their similarity and indeed solidarity with nature's purely geometrical structure. Lines, after their initial definition, in fact, quickly veer towards the invisible. On explaining the «art of circumscription» (i.e. 'the tracing of contours'), for example, Alberti advises using «the finest possible lines», lines so fine that they «almost flee from sight»[23] and shortly afterwards even states that surfaces (rather than lines or points) constitute the principal visible parts of painting, appearing thereby to squarely contradict his original definition and exclude even painters' lines from the realm of the visible.[24] Though of course this in itself is a contradiction in terms, it seems clear that Alberti wished pictorial lines to be as evocative of immaterial, mathematical lines as possible. That pictorial lines should suggest the presence of a similar yet subtler underlying structure present in nature is further suggested by

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[22] See *supra*, n. 1.

[23] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, II 31: «fiat lineis quam tenuissimis atque admodum visum fugientibus».

[24] Cf. *ibid.*, II 35: «The principal parts of the work are the surfaces» (*Primæ igitur operis partes superficies*). For an insightful and probing analysis of Alberti's conception of points, lines, surfaces see JACK GREENSTEIN, *On Alberti's «Sign»: Vision and composition in* Quattrocento *painting*, in «The Art Bulletin», LXXIX, 1997, pp. 669-698.

Alberti's insistence that circumscription is about «*indicating* external contours with a *sign*»,[25] that the pictorial line should «do no more than *accompany* the contours»[26] – as if producing lines in painting was not about reproducing lines *seen* in nature, but rather about rendering visible purely mathematical lines. Backing this up is the fact, pointed out by Hubert Damisch,[27] that Alberti's recommendations on the subject of lines recall the famous passage in Pliny the Elder's *Natural history*, stating that painters' lines should «suggest the presence of other things behind and disclose even what they hide».[28] In a word, in the same way that the distinction between painters' geometry and pure geometry serves to extend rather than limit the analogical scope of the passage on the human skeleton by firmly pairing the 3D pictorial grid and nature's corresponding geometrical structure, the ambiguous nature of the albertian line consolidates this tripartite analogy by establishing the 3D pictorial grid as an intermediary between the material human skeleton and nature's underlying immaterial structure.

Coming back to the actual passage on the use of the human skeleton, Alberti concludes it with the following observation:

> And truly, since nature itself exhibits all these measures [*mensuræ*] in a visual manner, the serious students of painting will find much gain in endeavouring to recognise them in nature.[29]

This remark seems to offer yet another confirmation that Alberti was thinking on several levels. Firstly, it is marked by a suggestively

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[25] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, II 31: «Nam est circumscriptio aliud nihil quam fimbriarum notatio» – my italics.

[26] Cf. *ibid.*: «Tum cuperem aliud nihil circumscriptione nisi fimbriarum ambitum prosequi» – my italics. On the difficult to translate notion of «fimbria», rendered approximately translated above by «contour», see ISABELLE BOUVRANDE, *L'atopie dans le* De pictura, in «Albertiana», VII, 2004, pp. 115-129.

[27] Cf. HUBERT DAMISCH, *Parlo come pittore*, in *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du Congrès international de Paris (Sorbonne-Institut de France-Institut culturel italien-Collège de France, 10-15 avril 1995) tenu sous la direction de F. Furlan, P. Laurens, S. Matton*, Édités par Francesco Furlan, Paris, Vrin & Torino, Aragno, 2000, pp. 555-574: 562.

[28] Cf. PLINY THE ELDER, *Natural history*, XXXV 67-68: «desinere, ut promittat alia post se ostendatque etiam quæ occultat». On the interpretation of this passage in fifteenth-century Italy, see M. BERT, *Lectures, réécritures et peintures à partir de Pline l'Ancien…*, cit., vol. I, pp. 66, 175-7, 210, 234-5, 240-3, 247, 285-6 and vol. II, p. 117.

[29] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, II 36: «At enim cum has omnes mensuras natura ipsa explicatas in medium exhibeat, tum in eisdem ab ipsa natura, propriò labore recognoscendis utilitatem non modicam inveniet studiosus pictor».

generalising turn: the mention of «nature itself» seems less an indication of where the painter should look for examples of human bodies, than a broadening of the discourse, a switch from the human body to a greater whole – an idea rendered all the more plausible by the fact that the analogy between the human body and the physical environment is present in several of Alberti's other works.[30] Secondly, the mention of «measures» (*mensuræ*), while referring back to the idea that the members of the body must be proportionally sized (*commensuræ*), which preceded the passage on the skeleton, seems in fact a curiously mathematical way of describing the human body and its constituent parts, but particularly suitable a term for both the 3D grid which forms the basis of the pictorial image and nature's corresponding geometrical structure. Finally, the choice of the verb «recognoscere» not only seems to stress the analogical nature of the description of the skeleton through the sense it carries of identifying something on the basis of having previously seen or been informed about it – in this case, the possibility of recognising nature's «skeleton» form the image provided by the human skeleton –, but also to specifically allude to nature's «skeleton» through its second sense, *i.e.* 'realisation' or 'acknowledgment of existence' – an action hardly necessary in the case of the intangible and invisible geometrical structure underpinning the natural world.

As usually – or subtly – as it is introduced, the idea that nature's «skeleton» need to be recognised seems to be something of a key point to understanding the *De pictura*. Alberti notably seemed to feel a certain apprehension about the whole idea of basing his pictorial method on nature's geometrical properties.

His oft-repeated remarks on both the novel and difficult nature of his treatise are invariably stimulated by passages dealing with mathematics and the least tangible properties of the natural world, rather than the actual art of painting. Indeed, before even beginning the treatise proper, Alberti clearly separates the novelty factor of his discourse from the subject of painting:

> [my books] are so conceived that what is treated in them – the new things quite as much as the art itself, worthy as this is of learned ears – will certainly delight scholarly readers.[31]

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[30] It notably underpins his architectural treatise, *De re ædificatoria.*

[31] Cf. L.B. Alberti, *De pictura*, dedication: «esse eos eiusmodi intelliges ut quæ in illis tractentur cum arte ipsa auribus eruditis digna tum rei novitate facile delectare studiosos queant».

Then in the treatise itself, these «new things» are repeatedly identified with mathematics and as a potential stumbling block for the reader. In the opening paragraph of the first part, for example, Alberti justifies his intention to explain the rudiments of geometry in terms of visible signs rather than purely mathematical entities on account of the newness and difficulty of the subject which he believes has never before been treated and which may be difficult for the reader to grasp.[32] Similar examples occur several times in the first part of the treatise, which in point of fact deals almost exclusively with mathematics, and with particular insistence towards its end, when, after having explained how to subdivide and use the ground-plane, he expresses his fear that its use will be little understood,[33] and insists at some length on the fact that, in general, the risk he runs of not being understood lies precisely in the conceptual basis of his method.[34]

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[32] Cf. *ibid.*, I 1: «I speak of these things non as a mathematician, but as a painter [...]. And we shall consider that we have achieved out purpose if, in this difficult subject, that as far as I can see has not been treated by anyone else, my reader will have been able to follow my meaning» (*non me ut mathematicum sed veluti pictorum hisce de rebus loqui [...]. Ac recte quidem esse nobiscum actum arbitrabimur si quoquo pacto in hac plane difficile et a nemine quod viderim alio tradita litteris materia, nos legentes intellexerint*).

[33] Cf. *ibid.*, I 21: «This method of dividing the pavement pertains especially to that part of painting that, when we come to it, we shall call "composition", which is such that I fear it may be little understood by the reader, either because of its novelty, or else on account of the brevity of the commentary» (*Hæc omnis dividendi pavimenti ratio maxime ad eam picturæ partem pertinet, quam nos compositionem suo loco nominabimus. Et huiusmodi est ut verear ne ob materiæ novitatem obque hanc commentandi brevitatem parum a legentibus intelligatur*).

[34] Cf. *ibid.*, I 22: «What I have said up to this point has been brief but, I believe, not completely obscure. I am however aware that my eloquence deserves no praise and also that he who does not understand from the first is unlikely to ever understand, however much effort he makes. To the subtle of wit and to those suited to painting, these things will be very easy and most beautiful no matter how they are expressed. To those who are rude and by nature little given to this noble art, these things – even were they most eloquently written – will be displeasing. This book should thus be read with care, because it is written without eloquence. I beg that I may be pardoned if, where I above all wish to be understood, I have given more care to making my words clear than to making them elegant. I believe that which follows will be less tedious to the reader» (*Qua de re hæc a me dicta sunt breviter et, ut existimo, non omnino obscure, sed intelligo qualia sint ut cum in his nullam eloquentiæ laudem adipisci queam, tum eadem qui primo aspectu non comprehenderit, vix ullo unquam vel ingenti labore apprehendat. Subtilissimis autem et ad picturam bene pronis ingeniis hæc, quoquomodo dicantur, facillima sane et pulcherrima sunt, quæ quidem rudibus et a natura parum ad has nobilissimas artes pronis, etiam si ab eloquentissimis dicantur, admodum ingrata sunt. A nobis vero eadem, quod sine ulla eloquentia brevissime recitata sint, fortassis non sine fastidio leguntur. Sed velim nobis dent veniam si, dum imprimis volui intelligi, id prospexi ut clara esset nostra oratio magis quam compta et ornata. Quæ vero sequentur minus, ut spero, tedium legentibus afferent*).

Why so much trepidation with respect to the mathematical concepts which underpin his advice on painting? Though the term «nature's skeleton» is not commonly employed in albertian literature, it is very commonly taken for granted that the 3D grid which Alberti proposed as the basis of the pictorial image was directly inspired by his understanding of nature's geometrical properties. Such an understanding is, incidentally, also commonly assumed to have formed the basis of the two famous perspective demonstrations carried out by Filippo Brunelleschi not long before Alberti wrote the *De pictura* and which, to all accounts, formed one of the latter's most immediate sources of inspiration[35] – reason for which Alberti's repeated declarations concerning the novelty of his treatise have appeared to many historians as somewhat vainglorious. Furthermore, it is also generally considered that both Alberti and Brunelleschi drew their ideas on nature from contemporary optical theories, from which it is indeed easy to infer a certain understanding of the properties of what we now call space, or more precisely euclidean space.[36] It is not my intention here to query either Alberti's or Brunelleschi's use of optics as a source, but it is worth bearing in mind that «infer» is very much the operative word here: while the concept of space is implied in these optical treatises, as indeed the works of Euclid himself, on which they are largely based and which Alberti himself alludes to, space is never actually described, under any term, as an entity in its own right. Moreover, late medieval optics tended to consider rectilinearity and proportionality as properties of visual rays, which were believed to intervene between the eye and the thing seen, rather than of the physical world as a whole. Thus, while the properties of certain substances were considered to facilitate vision (air, for example, was thought to either convey these rays or to be easily

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[35] Brunelleschi's demonstrations were made known by ANTONIO DI TUCCIO MANETTI, *Vita di Brunelleschi* (1480 *ca.*). For reconstructions and analyses see SAMUEL Y. EDGERTON JR., *The mirror, the window and the telescope: How Renaissance linear perspective changed our vision of the universe*, Ithaca (N.Y.), Cornell University Press, 2009, ch. VI-VIII; MARTIN KEMP, *The science of art: Optical themes in western art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 12-14; HUBERT DAMISCH, *L'origine de la perspective*, Paris, Flammarion, 1987, *passim.*

[36] Regarding Alberti's debt to optics, the major reference remains SAMUEL Y. EDGERTON JR., *The Renaissance rediscovery of linear perspective*, New York, Harper & Row, 1975. For a more recent study of the question see DOMINIQUE RAYNAUD, *L'hypothèse d'Oxford: Essai sur les origines de la perspective*, in «Médiévales», XVIII, 1999, pp. 176-178. On late medieval optics, see EDWARD GRANT, *A source book in medieval science*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1974, pp. 376-568.

penetrated by them, contrary to solid bodies), the idea that all types of matter (solids, liquids and gases) were imbued with the same geometrical properties was anything but generalised. The conception of the natural world remained essentially aristotelian – a collection of bodies, certainly contiguous, but nevertheless heterogeneous. The idea of a continuous, homogeneous, measurable 3D extension, characterised by a common set of geometrical properties, would not be explicitly formulated before the seventeenth century and, while it is likely that it was in the process of emerging before that, it was nevertheless far from being a commonly accepted idea during Alberti's lifetime.

This being, Alberti's acute sense of the novelty of his treatise still need to be measured against Brunelleschi's understanding of the spatial properties of the physical world. Of course, Alberti's sentiment of priority may simply have resulted from the textual nature of his work: Brunelleschi himself left no written, nor indeed graphic account of his demonstrations and still less any formal evidence that they were based on previously acquired understanding concerning the geometric properties of the physical world. It is not however without interest that the source which made known Brunelleschi's demonstrations, namely the *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi* written by Antonio Manetti in the late fifteenth century, suggests that their importance in terms of pictorial representation only came to be appreciated ulteriorly:

> At that time, [Brunelleschi] himself put into practice what painters today call perspective, since it is part of that science which effectively consists in correctly and rationally rendering the diminutions and enlargements that appear to the eye when looking at things far away or close at hand: buildings, plains, mountains and all types of countryside, with, in every place, the size of the figures and other things corresponding to the distance at which they are seen: whence emerged the rule[37] which is the basis of all things of this kind that have been done from then till now.[38]

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[37] The word Manetti uses, «regola», is generally interpreted in the sense of 'principle'; the word was also commonly used at the time to designate instruments of measure.

[38] Cf. ANTONIO MANETTI, *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi* preceduta da *La novella del Grasso*, Edizione critica di Domenico De Robertis con Introduzione e note di Giuliano Tanturli, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1976, p. 54: «Cosi ancora in que' tempi e' misse innanzi ed in atto, lui proprio, quello ch'e dipintori oggi dicono prospettiva, perché ella è una partie di quella scienza che è, in effetto, porre bene e con ragion le diminuzioni ed acrescimenti che appaiono agli occhi degli uomini delle cose di longi e da presso: casamento, piani et montagne e paesi d'ogni ragione, ed in ogni luogo le figure e l'altre cose di quella misura che s'appertiene a quella distanza che le si mostrano di lungi; e da lui è nato la regola, che è la importanza

If perspective as a method of pictorial representation was a spin-off rather than the primary aim of Brunelleschi's demonstrations, what the latter was remains an open question. Given Brunelleschi's known interest in optics, the most obvious alternative – and indeed one relatively regularly proffered by specialists – is that he intended to demonstrate the principles of vision. In concrete terms, what he actually showed is that all receding lines converge in a single point and that this point was connected to the eye by a straight line. This latter point he proved as follows: first he painted an image of Florence's baptistery with all the receding lines duly drawn back to a single point; he then pierced this point with a hole; finally, looking through this hole from the back side of the painting while standing in the spot the picture was painted from, he used a mirror, held up in front of him so as to reflect the image, to check the correspondence between his image and the real baptistery. Besides proving the correspondence between the point of view and the vanishing point, this first demonstration showed the image to be based on a rectilinear pyramidal structure which formed the inverted image of the visual pyramid that optical treatises of the time described as being formed by the visual rays between the eye and any observed object larger than a single point – each point of a given object being connected to the eye by a separate ray. And, at the same time as showing the image to be based on such a structure, it suggested the world to be equally so. There was thus, in this demonstration, a kind of transfer of the visual pyramid from between the eye and the thing seen to within the visible world, an objectifying of the visual rays. By placing image against the eye and reflecting it back, Brunelleschi seemed in fact to be playing deliberately on the idea of substitution. What I am getting at is that what he wished to verify about vision was based on a hypothesis concerning the natural world, namely that the physical world as a whole is endowed with a single, rectilinear and regular mathematical structure or, in other words, that all matter is characterised by a set of constant geometrical properties which informed the way things are perceived by the eye.

In terms of novelty, were this to have been the case, Brunelleschi would indeed have preceded Alberti in recognising the continuous,

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di tutto quello che di cio s'è fatto da quel tempo in qua». The suggestion that the pictorial implications of Brunelleschi's demonstrations only came to be recognized ulteriorly is pointed out by GIULIO C. ARGAN, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, Milano, Mondadori, 1952 – Fr. tr. by Arlain Delange: *Brunelleschi*, Paris, Macula, 1987, pp. 18 f.

rectilinear and regular structure underpinning all the different forms and substances that compose the physical world. In other words, it would have been Brunelleschi who "discovered" nature's «skeleton». It would, however, effectively have been Alberti who – albeit rather elliptically – first put this observation into words, that is, who first proposed the idea of nature being endowed with a geometrical «skeleton». This would have been enough to explain his acute sense of his own novelty. But Alberti would also have been the first to recognise or, at least, to act upon, the pictorial possibilities of Brunelleschi's demonstrations, meaning that the former's contribution to the history of painting would have been (even) greater than it is generally considered to be. Additionally, with respect to traditional interpretations concerning both Alberti's and Brunelleschi's position regarding the relationship between image and nature, these conjectures would imply a double inversion. Firstly, Brunelleschi, rather than verifying a pictorial system against a pre-existing idea of nature's proprieties, would have been using pictorial images to verify a hypothesis concerning the nature of these properties. Secondly, Alberti, having recognised that if painted images could be used to show how the physical world is possessed of a regular geometrical structure then this structure could conversely be proposed as a model in itself or, more precisely, that if nature worked along the same lines as Brunelleschi's panels then these lines could be used as the basis of a pictorial method aimed at imitating nature, Alberti, in presenting such a method, would have been deliberately inverting Brunelleschi's discovery, switching the role of model from image to nature.

Though no hard and fast evidence supports these conjectures, they are not entirely without foundation: various indications and hints pointing in their direction are contained in both Brunelleschi's demonstrations and Alberti's *De pictura*, amongst which, one of the most suggestive is Alberti's insistence of the notion of place, which, as we have seen, is closely connected to the idea of nature serving as a model for painting. To explain the connection between the notion of place and the use of the pictorial image as a model for investigating the geometrical properties of the physical world requires explaining what the notion of place meant, not only for Alberti and Brunelleschi, but more generally for painters of their time, as well as fourteenth- and even late thirteenth-century painters. During the whole of this period, place was both a far more precise notion that it is nowadays and one which underwent a radical evolution. Brunelleschi's demonstrations and a good

part of the *De pictura*'s logic may be seen as being closely connected with this evolution, the principal phases of which I shall endeavour to describe as succinctly as possible.[39]

In the thirteenth century, the pictorial image of place was a generic image. A relatively wide range of pictorial elements – buildings, hills, thrones, etc. – served as places in paintings, but what made them identifiable as such was a particular set of formal and functional norms associated with the notion of place. These norms were determined by the interactions between several different domains or traditions in which the notion of place was important. Besides the pictorial arts, the principal of these were the art of memory, natural philosophy and the socio-territorial organisation. Theology also entered into the affair through the importance it accorded to the notion of «placelessness». The thirteenth-century notion of place was in fact part of a dichotomous conception opposing place and placelessness. Formally, the idea of place was associated with a solid volume of relatively modest dimensions, with neat, clear-cut edges, easy to immediately apprehend as a single entity. As far as painting goes, almost any thirteenth-century central Italian image will serve to illustrate the way specific environmental elements such as buildings, chairs, rivers, etc. were accordingly scaled up or down and / or compressed into compact masses.[40] Place was also something conceived of as private, in the sense that each place was *the* place of something or somebody; it was not a general, collectively shared environment. Again it is easily observed in images of the time that places systematically appear as the particular place of either a single figure or a small, generally tightly compact, group of figures. Finally, place was associated with various states, ranging from social importance (and in the case of painting also including narrative importance) to the physical state of immobility, while placelessness signified social insignificance, material poverty, vulnerability, suffering and errancy, but also spiritual wealth. As the fundamental principle of the pictorial environment, this dichotomy formed the base of a complex system of signification, wherein the state

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[39] For a detailed and illustrated study of the subject see ANNA LITTLE, *Du lieu à l'espace: Transformations de l'environnement pictural en Italie centrale: XIII^e^-XV^e^ siècles*, Ph.D. dissertation: Tours, Université «François Rabelais»-C.É.S.R., 2010 – *online* at *http://www.theses.fr/2010TOUR2022*. The illustrations follow the text.

[40] An easily found example is provided by BONAVENTURA BERLIGHIERI's *St. Francis altarpiece* (1240 *ca.*) in Bardi Chapel, San Francesco, Florence, Italy.

or indeed states of each figure could be not only conveyed through the attribution or deprivation of a place, but also nuanced by way of incomplete placing. Both the formal and functional properties of place and placelessness were promoted through a range of comparative compositions which presented two or more different kinds of places (buildings, hills, etc.) in such a way as to encourage their comparison and, consequently, the recognition of their equivalence and eventual interchangeability within the dichotomous place / placelessness system. These comparative compositions often made use of symmetry within single images; they also worked through repetition and memory: the use of a single type of comparative composition for many different iconographic themes containing different types of places inevitably produced an effect of mnemonic superposition between the different places which were successively found occupying the same position within the composition.[41]

In the early fourteenth century, the place / placelessness pictorial system took on a decidedly political slant. The most explicit examples are provided by Sienese painting, which played an important part in promoting the effective authority of the communal government in the early decades of the century. At the turn of the century, the Sienese commune, though officially in power since the 1270s, was still struggling to assert its authority in the face of a persistent feudal system. By the mid-century, they had succeeded in becoming one of the most effective communes in Italy. The key to their success was a vast territorial campaign which radically redefined the notion of place. All through the thirteenth century and throughout much of Italy, the perception of place as a privately owned, solidly compact architectural mass constituted one of the most steadfast supporting pillars of the feudal system. Quintessential symbol of power and identity reference par excellence, the feudal «castello» monopolised the notion of place to the extent that all other parts of the territory either adopted the model or found themselves relegated to the status of non-places. The principal example of the first case was the «isolato», the typical urban architectural component of the time, a kind of compact complex, based around an closed courtyard, enclosed with high solid walls and housing one the city's great families and their numerous dependants;

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[41] For further details see ANNA LITTLE, *Place and placelessness in* Duecento *narrative images*, forthcoming.

equally modelled on the «castello» were churches, monasteries, hospitals, etc. Non-places included not only open stretches of countryside, but also urban open spaces, including streets and, curious as it may seem, even towns as a whole. In fact, the problem with towns was precisely that they were not perceived as a whole. It is notable that while towns did appear as places in paintings of the time, their status as places results from their being systematically compressed into compact solid forms often all but indistinguishable from «castelli». In reality, towns were perceived as a kind of concentrated form of the countryside. The Commune, in principle, lord of Siena and its «contado» (essentially composed of countryside and «castelli»[42]) was, in practice, more or less lord of nowhere. To remedy this situation, it undertook an ambitious and extensive territorial campaign aimed at redefining the notion of place such that the capital, and eventually the territory as a whole, could and would be perceived by the population as places – places to which they belonged, which formed their principal identity reference and which were as indissociable from the Commune as each «castello» was from its resident lord. The strategy was subtle. It involved first raising public space to an equal footing with private places, and then raising it further still, in order that it replace the latter as the embodiment of the idea of place.

Among the numerous measures deployed to this end, several had a clear and direct impact on the pictorial image of place. The most fundamental of these concerned the elevation of public urban spaces to the status of place. An intense series of laws and edicts, ranging from the levelling and paving of the city's main streets and public square to the alignment and materials of private buildings bordering them, ensured that these spaces were provided with as many of the formal characteristics associated with the kind of private architectural complexes that monopolised the idea of place. Obviously, the Commune could not transform public spaces into solid architectural masses, but they could provide them with a clear-cut form and noble surfaces, thus enabling them to cease to appear as simple antitheses of private places and begin to be seen as positive urban elements in the own right – urban components which could be, and indeed were strongly encouraged

[42] The notion of the city-state was still in the making. The «contado», by definition all the land under the jurisdiction of the Commune with the exception of the capital, was a complicated entity, often riddled with exempted and partly exempted enclaves.

to be seen as comparable and equivalent to private places. Paintings, as may be imagined, played an important role in this respect. Streets, entirely absent from Sienese painting before the turn of the century, appear in numerous images from the first decade of the fourteenth century onwards and typically in such a way as to emphasise precisely the formal similarities targeted by the Commune's town planning edicts. Playing on the type of comparative compositions employed in thirteenth-century images to promote the generic image of place, streets appear again and again as neatly delineated, rectilinear architectural entities, carefully proportioned to the height and width of the buildings which flank them, so that, in terms of size and shape, they appear as perfectly equivalent urban components. Simone Martini's *Miracle of the child falling from a balcony* from his *Blessed Agostino Altarpiece* of 1324,[43] for example, works on the same tripartite compositional principle frequently used in the thirteenth century for the *Baptism of Christ*, where the river – not an altogether easy element to incorporate into the equivalent place system – was shown, similarly to the riversides flanking it, as a humped volume.[44] As is the case in Simone Martini's image, streets were frequently endowed with overhanging elements which accentuated the impression of a closed cube. In the case of roads seen leading away from the picture surface, a similar result was produced by curtailing the impression of length. A particularly eloquent example of this ''cubic'' treatment is provided by Duccio's *Healing of the blind man* (one of the panels of his *Maestà*, 1308-11),[45] in which the lower level of the buildings and street which form the architectural backdrop essentially appear as an aligned series of similarly dimensioned, alternatively solid and void rectilinear volumes.[46] As the presence of the *loggia* in this image, and, *a fortiori*, the whole upper level of the architectural mass which it is a part of suggests, this kind of pre-

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[43] Conserved in Siena's Pinacoteca Nazionale. All images cited are easily found on the *web*.

[44] See for example the top right hand panel of the *John the Baptist altarpiece* painted around 1270 by an anonymous Sienese painter (MAESTRO DEL PALIOTTO DI SAN GIOVANNI BATTISTA) and conserved in Siena's Pinacoteca Nazionale.

[45] DUCCIO's *Healing of a blind man* is conserved in the National Gallery, London; the majority of the *Maestà*'s panels are in Siena's Pinacoteca Nazionale.

[46] For a detailed analysis of this image and its relation to the Commune's territorial campaign see ANNA LITTLE, *L'image de la voirie dans la peinture siennoise de la première moitié du XIV^e siècle: Enjeux politiques et picturaux*, in «Humanistica», IV-2, 2009, pp. 81-91.

sentation of streets as equivalent to the solid architectural masses which had hitherto monopolised the image of place, went hand in hand with a tendency to hollow out these masses. The overall upshot was that the thirteenth-century image of place and its negative counterpart, non-place, underwent a kind of fusion. The pictorial environment as a whole consequently lost its dichotomous principle: place and non-place ceased to constitute its primary components; these now merged into a single element: a hollow, essentially cubic unit.

At the same time as this fusion was going on, a second series of territorial measures were also proving influential. These measures concerned circulation within the Sienese territory. The promotion of circulation played a vital role in the Commune's redefinition of place. Processions, the elaboration of an annual calendar of celebrations held in different churches and chapels, rotating county fairs, the abolition of regional taxes, all these offered the population the means of appropriating larger territorial entities than the privately owned architectural building or complex as "their" place. As an identity reference, place stopped working through immediate ownership or residential proximity and began to correspond to a sphere of activity. Increased circulation within larger areas, together with a certain insistence on the crossing of boundaries (notably the city walls, but also the portals of churches and the entrances of other urban buildings) also helped to promote the idea of all territorial components, public and private, as being knit into a single whole. Finally, it also helped develop the image of public space as a network which not only encompassed and enmeshed the isolated private places, but ultimately formed a fundamental substratum – image which reduced the private place from a territorial mainstay to a small occupying entity. Paintings clearly reflected the Commune's interest in circulation. Like streets, the image of collective movement was anything but commonplace in thirteenth-century painting, but in the early fourteenth century a sudden fervour for pictures of processions developed, and if these were almost always incorporated in biblical iconographic themes, and the particular mix of civic, aristocratic and religious elements that they exhibited, as well as the presence of key elements of the Commune's campaign such as the crossing of the city walls, left little doubt as to their contemporary source of inspiration. Painting also played an important role in emphasising the continuous network / *substratum* image of public space. The outstanding example in this respect is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's famous *Good government* fresco, commissioned by the Commune for their Council

chamber in the Palazzo pubblico.[47] The centralised coming and going through the city gate, converting, as it does, the wall (carefully presented so as to be visible from both sides) from a separating element into a consolidating one and constituting the nerve centre of a vast network of roads and routes which the bird's eye point of view enables to view winding around the houses in the town and spreading into the seemingly limitless distance, eloquently illustrates the idea of a state forged through the free circulation of its population. Regarding the vastness of the panorama, this image also notably illustrates the way in which the new image of place incorporated the limitless quality of the old non-place. Deliberately suggested as continuing beyond the edges of the image, place is no longer something that can be apprehended in its entirety with a single glance.

The new pictorial image of place was however far from the vague, unpredictable extension that non-place had been. The criterion of apprehensibility remained valid, but this now depended on inner rather than outer limits and was related to the idea of place as something which could be multiplies and divided. Such an idea was firmly rooted in territorial concerns and the necessity of equating radically different scaled places, ranging from single buildings to the entire territory. Translated into painting, this led to a modification of the equivalent place system: instead of simply rescaling places in order to present them as comparable, artists began to play with points of view in order to preserve both the system of comparative compositions and changes of scale. In Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Good government*, for example, the town and the countryside respectively occupy exactly half the surface of the fresco and are thus suggested as the two major components of the Sienese territory. At the at the same time, the town is seen from a closer point of view, meaning that the amount of visible urban space and the amount of visible countryside are unequal; the town can thus also be seen as equivalent in size to a small part of the represented countryside and consequently understood to be a territorial entity which can be fitted many times into the latter. This play on inter-fitting places rapidly led not only to the introduction of larger territorial entities into the pictorial system of equivalent places, but also smaller entities: single buildings started to be suggested to break down into rooms and then into even smaller elements – elements which veered distinctly

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[47] AMBROGIO LORENZETTI, *Good government* (1338), Siena.

away from the purely territorial notion of place. As a result of these developments, the criterion according to which place should be apprehensible in a single glance ceased to apply and its apprehensibility came to rely on the relationship between different sized places: how many multiples of a given type of place made up a larger one or, conversely, into how many smaller places it could be divided.

We are obviously drawing nearer to the kind of things that Alberti and Brunelleschi were interested in and the last stage of the evolution of pictorial place brings us right up to the emergence of a 3D grid as the foundation of the pictorial image. The multi-scalar character of the new image of pictorial place, combined with the tendency, pointed out in the case of Duccio's *Healing of the blind man*, to schematise territorial components, to more or less reduce them to simple geometrical volumes, rapidly led the political stakes to be accompanied by a more abstract form of reflection, a kind of analytical inquiry into place. This started with the use of some of the smaller scales of place as models which affirmed the identity and properties of larger ones. The most notable examples of this are provided by stairs and other similarly staggered cubic elements, such as beds – almost always two or three tiered affairs, with staggered platform, base and mattress.[48] Like streets and movement, stairs, as well as this kind of bed, were again all but inexistent in thirteenth-century italian painting and, like the former, they appear in a sudden spate from the early decades of the fourteenth century. From their earliest appearance, they appear as miniature schematic echoes of what is at play in the image as a whole. Imposing as they do a kind of 3D mirror-image of themselves on the adjacent air, their presence serves in numerous images to underline the equivalence between the solid masses of private places and the hollow volumes of streets. However, certain painters soon took their use further, employing them to explore the relationship between volumes, surfaces and lines and eventually between visible forms and mathematical forms. Once again, this orientation ensued directly from the political redefinition of place; the equivalence between solid and void volumes leading to deductions concerning other geometrical figures and, in particular, to comparisons between, first, material and virtual planes and, subse-

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[48] For a concise study of these elements in early fourteenth-century Sienese painting see ANNA LITTLE, *Le motif de l'escalier dans le développement de l'espace moderne pictural: Sienne, première moitié du XIV^e siècle*, in «Ligeia: Dossiers sur l'art», XX, 73-76, 2007, pp. 19-32.

quently, linear architectural elements and lines – the latter often being suggested to be without material substance in themselves, as, for instance, in the case of lines resulting from the juxtaposition of two surfaces. These developments led to a new modification of the pictorial image of place, the accent shifting from its cubic components to its planar structure and then to its linear structure – a structure suggested in numerous fourteenth- and fifteenth-century images, notably by way of gridded floor-planes, stairs and beds, to be invisible in itself and to run indifferently through open spaces and solid matter. For detailed analyses of these images, produced by painters from both Siena and elsewhere, and amongst whom numerous Florentine contemporaries of Brunelleschi and Alberti were particularly active, I refer to my Ph.d. thesis: *Du lieu à l'espace: Transformations de l'environnement pictural, XIII^e^-XV^e^ siècles*, consultable *online*.[49]

Before coming back to my main argument, *i.e.* how the evolving image of place backs up the idea that Brunelleschi used the pictorial image as a speculative model to explore the geometric properties of the natural world and, consequently, that Alberti, recognising that image and nature functioned along similar lines, built his pictorial method by switching the role of model over to nature, I would like make a few observations regarding the general implications of identifying the emergence of the underlying rectilinear 3D grid as the conceptual basis of the image as a product of the pictorial reflection on place. Firstly, it necessitates revising the commonly accepted idea that this grid was invented or discovered by Brunelleschi or, in other words, that its use went hand in hand with Brunelleschi's innovative correlating of the point of view and the vanishing point. In the light of the evolution of pictorial place, the 3D grid rather appears to have resulted from a long process, firmly rooted in the fourteenth century and in which Sienese painters, and indeed Sienese politics, played an important role. Linear perspective, as theorised by Alberti, seems in fact to have emerged through two distinct steps: 1) the drawn out and spread out development of the underlying 3D pictorial grid; 2) its adaptation, by Brunelleschi, to a single vanishing point, correlated with a single point of view. Secondly, the independent emergence of the grid with respect to its being put into perspective by Brunelleschi helps explain the important presence, both before and after the latter's demonstra-

[49] A. LITTLE, *Du lieu à l'espace...*, cit.

tions and the appearance of the *De pictura*, of two and three-dimensional gridded elements in images where the perspective is false: the presence of a 3D rectilinear grid was first and foremost a form of place and not systematically conceived of as a means of imitating the natural world or visual experience. Thirdly, the independence of the 3D grid with respect to Brunelleschi's demonstrations and the *De pictura* provides at least a partial response to a question which, though rather hushed, has long puzzled historians of art, namely how it was that a treatise known to have been relatively little read in the fifteenth century and two more or less private demonstrations which seem to have incited little interest and no written accounts before the 1480s had such a massive impact: half of what Brunelleschi and Alberti are accredited with inventing was already in the process of emerging.

To come back to the main point: what suggests that Brunelleschi's demonstrations and Alberti's *De pictura* are linked to the evolution of the pictorial image of place? In the case of Brunelleschi it should first be noted that the point at which the evolution of the pictorial image of place had arrived in his day could have provided the idea of putting the entire image into perspective. Painters had, after all, long been in the habit of foreshortening individual objects.[50] What was radically new about Brunelleschi's two panels was that the entire image was treated as a single entity. Such a conception was, as we have seen, firmly rooted in the equivalence between solid and void volumes. It is interesting in this respect that the sites Brunelleschi used for his demonstrations, and particularly the second, were emblematic composites of buildings – the baptistery and the *Signoria* – and the public space that surrounded them. In point of fact, the demonstrations fit into and prolong the pictorial system of equivalence in many ways. Besides deliberately using a real mirror to equate the point of view and the vanishing point, Brunelleschi was surely conscious of the way the internal perspective construction of his panels formed the mirror-image of the visual pyramid. Such plays on mirror-images, as we have seen, were one of the principal characteristics of the comparative compositions, as well as the major attraction of stairs – stairs which not only converted the mirror-image into a three-dimensional model, but also enabled it to be turned in every sense: it did not take a huge conceptual leap to envisage the im-

[50] Any of the previously cited examples from the thirteenth and fourteenth century will serve as examples, as indeed numerous other images from earlier centuries. Medieval painting is, in general, far less "flat" than it is made out to be.

age itself as a model of the physical world. Finally, the fact and the way that Brunelleschi includes movement in his second demonstration can also be seen as prolonging the pictorial reflection. What moves are in fact real clouds and Brunelleschi includes them in the image by cutting away that part of his painted panel corresponding to the sky. This inclusion of moving clouds within the picture field is often seen as expressing the limits of linear perspective;[51] it can alternatively be seen as a way of suggesting the continuous presence of stable underlying properties underpinning all matter, even the most unstable; an alternative which is notably backed up by the fact that movement, after contributing to the unification of the pictorial environment, became a major object of the pictorial reflection alongside place.[52] Lastly, the cutting away of a part of the image can be seen as a way of dissolving the idea of the pictorial image as a model "apart" and making it, exactly like stairs within the pictorial environment, an integrated part of a greater whole at the same time as a miniaturised model.

Turning to the *De pictura*, the principal indication is provided, as mentioned, by the importance Alberti accords to place and, at the same time, his seemingly rather uncertain idea of what exactly place is. His declaration that «whenever we look at a thing, we see it is something that occupies a place»,[53] perpetuating as it does a long literary tradition consisting in systematically citing Aristotle's affirmation that «every sensible body occupies a place»,[54] suggests that he adhered to the aristote-

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[51] See HUBERT DAMISCH, *Théorie du nuage: Pour une histoire de la peinture*, Paris, Seuil, 1972.

[52] The changing form of the pictorial place went hand in hand with a radical modification in the pictorial expression of movement: closely related to the Aristotelian definition of local movement as the passage from one place to another, movement in thirteenth-century painting was essentially expressed by the crossing of a gap between two solid volumes; in the course of the fourteenth century, it because a question of crossing a planar boundary between two spaces; in the fifteenth century, a spate of notably Florentine images explored the idea of movement as a measurable trajectory by correlating mobile bodies (walking figures, poured water, etc.) with series of regularly spaced virtual limits (examples include BOTTICELLI, *Baptism of St. Zenobius and his appointment as a bishop*, 1500-05, Tempera on wood, London, National Gallery; MANTEGNA, *Crucifixion of Christ*, Detail of the *San Zeno altarpiece*, 1457-59, Oil on wood, Paris, Louvre; GHIRLANDAIO, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1485-90 *ca.*, Fresco, Florence, Santa Maria Novella. See A. LITTLE, *Du lieu à l'espace...*, cit., pp. 271-278).

[53] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, II 30: «whenever we look at a thing, we see it is something that occupies a place» (*quidem cum quid aspicimus, id videmus esse aliquid quod locum occupet*).

[54] Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, IV (208b). And again, *ibid.*, IV (209a): «[...] just as every

lian concept of place as a private, enveloping container, a discrete entity defined by the contained thing. At the same time, the notion of «collocare» (or 'putting things in their places') is explained with respect to the 3D grid and its constitutive parts – cubes, squares and lines – which, on the contrary, suggests that he conceived of place as a relative position, a position within a set of regular coordinates. It would seem in fact that Alberti was at once loathed to contradict such an eminent authority on place as Aristotle and overtly dissociate himself from the estimable scholarly tradition of citing or paraphrasing his definition and keen to present place according to his own lights – or at least to new lights, because the idea of place as an underlying 3D grid closely associated with the notion of place also transpires through various aspects of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Commentarii*, Piero della Francesca's *Della prospettiva del dipingere* and Pomponius Gauricus' *De sculptura*, all of which also contain trace indications of the pictorial evolution of place. To give but a sole example, Ghiberti, when describing the famous doors he made for the Baptistery of Florence, employs the word «casamenti» to designate of the art of positioning or placing of things within the image.[55] He borrowed this word, the etymological root of which – «casa» – refers to the private residence, from a then recent type of urban building, a kind of block of flats, characterised by its multiple, modular apartments. As a choice for the art of correctly placing things within the image, it seems not only to convey the idea of the underlying 3D grid present in the *De pictura*, but also to attest to the link between this new pictorial element and the evolution of the pictorial image of place.

Coming back to Alberti, something of a similar trace attestation may be identified in his evocation of woven cloth when defining the

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body is in its place, so, too, every place has a body in it». Following Aristotle, paraphrased versions of this idea rapidly became almost compulsory introductory material for classical and medieval works dealing with or touching on the notion of place, from natural philosophical and theological treatises to works on the art of memory.

[55] Cf. LORENZO GHIBERTI, *I commentarî (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, II I 333)*, Introduzione e cura di Lorenzo Bartoli, Firenze, Giunti, 1998, II VI 1, p. 95: «Furono istorie dieci tutti in casamenti, colla ragione che l'occhio gli misura e veri in modo tale, stando remoti, da essi appariscono rilevati. Anno pochissimo rilievo et in su e piani si veggono le figure che sono propinque apparire maggiori e ˙lle remote minore, come adimostra il vero. E ò seguito tutta questa opera con dette misure». On the problems of translating this passage and, in particular, the term «casamenti», see RICHARD KRAUTHEIMER, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press, 1956, pp. 230-234; KATHLYN BLOOM, *Lorenzo Ghiberti's space in relief: Method and theory*, in «The Art Bulletin», LI, 1969, pp. 164-169: 168, n. 27; and A. LITTLE, *Du lieu à l'espace* ..., cit., pp. 300-305.

surface: «If many lines are joined closely together like threads in cloth, they will create a surface».[56] Not only does this helpful comparison anticipate the veil and its link with the geometrical properties of nature, but it also inevitably recalls the essential role played by chequered bedspreads in the evolution of the notion of place and, in particular, in the passage from surface to line. Alberti may of course have simply been referring here to the etymology of the word «line» which is derived from «linen». He was likely to have been aware of this because it is specified by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiæ*, which Alberti is known to have read.[57] Moreover, the passage in question would certainly have caught his attention since deals with building, one of his subjects of predilection.[58] He may even have intended a double allusion, discretely confronting this passage with the pictorial evolution of place. Certainly such a ploy would have appealed to his wit: Isidore's etymological specification comes up through a discussion about walls, the line in question is an architectural instrument of measure, and the remarks he makes about it lead directly into the subject of stairs.[59]

Finally, the accumulative progression which characterises Alberti's conception of the art of painting reflects – both positively and negatively – the progression of the pictorial analysis of place. That is to say, by, on the one hand, straightforwardly reproducing and, on the other, inverting, in the way of a mirror, certain aspects of this progression. The positive reflection consists in the progression from individual, discrete entities to overall unity which characterises both the pictorial analysis and the *De pictura*: the former starting with discrete solid volumes and culminating in the continuous 3D grid; the latter starting with individual mathematical figures (point, line, surface) and building up to the unified «historia». The simultaneous mirror-image results from the way Alberti inverts the pictorial analysis' progression from material volumes to mathematics, starting himself with mathematics and finishing with material volumes. There is also a form of inversion in the fact that the method described in the *De pictura* is all about

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[56] Cf. L.B. ALBERTI, *De pictura*, I 2: «Lineæ plures quasi fila in tela adacta si cohæreant, superficiem ducent».

[57] Cf. MASSIMO DANZI, *Leon Battista Alberti e le "strutture" del discorso familiare fra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, in «Versants», XXXVIII, 2000, pp. 61-77: 70.

[58] Cf. ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Etymologiæ*, XIX 18: «On the instruments of *Ædificorum*». My thanks to Maurice Brock for having pointed out this passage to me.

[59] On Alberti's wit and his taste for this kind of overlapping referencing see *supra*, n. 1.

building up – from point to line, from line to surface, from surface to bodily member, etc. –, while the pictorial analysis proceeded through a process of breaking down – from volume to surface, from surface to line, etc. This article's title thus refers not only to the idea that Alberti switched the role of model from image to nature with respect to Brunelleschi's demonstrations, but also to the way that the *De pictura* inverts the very nature of the model provided by painting. Incidentally, this manner of reformulating the analytical progression of the pictorial analysis falls in aptly with Alberti's choice of the word «historia» to designate the culmination of the artistic process – a word which, as Jack Greenstein has pointed out, he seems to have borrowed from a long historico-literary tradition in which it referred to the literary presentation of the results produced by an inquiry or investigation.[60]

Why is there no explicit mention of the seemingly important contribution of the pictorial reflection on place in the *De pictura*? How to account for the discrepancy between Alberti's seeming debt towards pictorial practice and his barely shielded contempt for all contemporary and recent painting. Was it simply a case of his being more interested in the end than the means? Or that he esteemed the evolution of the pictorial place too long and too difficult to explain? Alternatively, were his seeming references to it simply unconscious reactions? Or was it that he considered the painters of the images which contributed to evolve the pictorial image of place to have themselves acted unconsciously? If Alberti was consciously inspired by what he saw in paintings, one possible motivation for deliberately not giving credit to a long practical tradition could have been a reluctance to compromise the absolute novelty factor of his treatise. A second could have been that he considered the empirical nature of the pictorial inquiry to present a risk to his declared aim of raising the status of painting to that of a science. Were this to have been the case, it may well have seemed a safer bet to insist on mathematics and optics as sources. It would also add a curiously ironical twist to the end of the story: in switching the role of model from image to nature and promoting imitation as painting's principal objective, Alberti would in fact have been putting an end to one of the most active periods of scientific inquiry in the history of painting.

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[60] Cf. JACK GREENSTEIN, *Alberti on* historia*: A Renaissance view of the structure of significance in narrative painting*, in «Viator», XXI, 1990, pp. 273-299.

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